

Stark before and after photographs reveal sharp decline of Norway's seabirds



A nesting area on Hornøya, a small uninhabited island in Vardø Municipality in Finnmark county in 2006 (left) and 2023 (right). Photograph: Rob Barrett and Signe Christensen-Dalsgaard/Rob

Barrett

When Rob Barrett set out to survey one of the country's largest colonies in the 1970s there were too many birds to count. Now, his pictures and archive images show a species decline echoed around the world

By Rebekah White

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In the mid-1970s, seabird researcher Rob Barrett set out in a rubber boat to survey one of Norway's largest seabird colonies. Equipped with a camera and a pair of binoculars, he planned to photograph the Syltefjord colony, in the far north of the country, then, back on land, develop the photos and fit them together to create a panorama. After that, he would count the birds.

As the boat drew closer to the cliffs, the gulls' chattering increased to an overwhelming level. So did the smell. The cliffs rose 100 metres above him, kittiwakes filling every nook and crevice. It continued like that for five kilometres along the coast.

After two or three attempts, Barrett decided there were simply too many birds for him to count with what he had. Subsequently, a better-equipped team estimated the number of kittiwakes there at more than 250,000 birds.

Now, three decades of Barrett's pictures from the Syltefjord colony, along with others gathered from museum archives, form the backbone point of a new series of before-and-after photographs showing the dramatic change to coastlines as seabirds have vanished.

A 1985 study estimated that more than 250,000 kittiwakes nested in Syltefjord, pictured. Today only a few thousand pairs remain.

Photographs: Rob Barrett and Signe Christensen-Dalsgaard/Rob Barrett

Today, just a few thousand birds remain at Syltefjord. "It is a very weak shadow of itself," says Barrett. "It's so sad to see it as it is."

Almost 90% of Norway's mainland kittiwakes have disappeared in the past four decades, as numbers of other seabird species also continue to fall. Between 2005 and 2015, the number of seabirds on the Norwegian mainland dropped by almost a third, according to the Norwegian Environment Agency.

While the photographs were taken in Norway, they illustrate a global shift. Half of Britain's seabird species have declined in the past 20 years, including a 42% drop for kittiwakes and 49% for common gulls. Seabird numbers are estimated to have declined globally by 70% overall between 1950 and 2010.

"This is quite dramatic, but it is also one of the bird groups that have done most poorly when you look globally," says Signe Christensen-Dalsgaard, a seabird ecologist at the Norwegian Institute for Nature Research. "You have this whole cocktail of things impacting the populations."



Vestveggen (West wall), Vedøy: As its name implies, this cliff faces due west. Here, too, the kittiwakes have vanished, as have the common guillemots and razorbills. The cliff is empty, like everywhere else on the island. In the 1950s, a few dozen Brünnich's guillemots also nested here, but they had already disappeared by the early 1990s.

Photographs : Tycho Anker-Nilssen

Christensen-Dalsgaard came up with the idea for the photography project after seeing before-and-after pictures of retreating glaciers. “I was thinking, ‘Wow, but that’s exactly the same for the seabird cliffs,’” she says. “I thought that it would be a nice way of showing what we know, but which is really hard to communicate.”

Over the summers of 2022 and 2023, she returned with Barrett, who is now retired, to many of the colonies he had studied while working for the Tromsø Museum. Sometimes, Barrett could show Christensen-Dalsgaard exactly where he’d stood to take the original pictures.

Seabirds are important to life on land: they bring nutrients from the sea to the coast through their guano. They are reliant on the ocean for food, so the fact they are struggling suggests other marine species are in trouble. “It’s a quite strong signal that something is not right in the ocean,” says Christensen-Dalsgaard.

Of course, says Barrett, seabirds face a range of stressors, not just a lack of food. “It’s fishing and overfishing. It’s climate change. There’s habitat removal and change. There’s aquaculture. There’s the oil industry, there’s the gas industry, there’s wind power. There’s shipping going to and fro. There’s pollution, and then tourism and so on. It’s just endless.”

For Christensen-Dalsgaard and Barrett, the pictures illustrate a type of intergenerational memory loss called “shifting baseline syndrome”. When change is slow, each generation believes their version of the environment is

normal. “They’ll read about what has happened before,” says Barrett, “but their mental picture of the woodlands or the coastline or the shore – or whatever – is their childhood up to the last 10 to 15 years. Not 50 years ago, when it was very, very different.”

Christensen-Dalsgaard says this can result in a lack of ambition. “We shouldn’t just accept how things are at the moment, and I think that’s what pictures like this can help us with, to understand what we should aim for.”

The project affected Christensen-Dalsgaard deeply. She had known the statistics of seabird decline, but says seeing it was another matter. She experienced a kind of “eco grief”, leading her to question her own work. “I was really paralysed, actually, by it. I was a bit like, ‘So what is the point of me sitting doing this every day? Why shouldn’t I just go in my garden and grow potatoes, because everything’s going to hell anyway?’”

It was a long process, she says, to reestablish a sense of purpose as a scientist. In the end, she took heart from the wider research community. “I can’t save the world,” she says, “but if we all piece our things together, then we’re moving somewhere.”